

# *Religion and the Affirmation of Identity*

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Religious belonging is one of the primary agencies in terms of which men may affirm their identity. It functioned more fully in this way when mankind was divided into small, local units, each with its own claim to access to supernatural protectors of its own. But although its role has diminished, even under the impact of the stronger social ties welded by nationalism, it has not entirely lost its capacity to confer identity, and in contemporary multi-cultural societies it sometimes plays a significant role. To set the scene, I turn first to a consideration of how religion has functioned to affirm identity in earlier phases of social development, before discussing its contemporary performance of this function.

In tribal society, religion was a group property, and this was perhaps no less the case in communal societies newly-evolved from tribalism (classical Greece, for example). In those societies religion functioned as what might be called an unconscious group ideology. Religion legitimized group identity and group-belonging by conferring on the community a claim to metaphysical origin and status. The group was said to be created by, or chosen by, and was most emphatically protected by its own deity or deities. When groups, tribes, or Greek city states fought each other, the conquerors made it their first task to desecrate the shrines of the gods of those whom they had defeated. In this way they emasculated or at least demoralized their adversaries —much as warriors in much later ages continued to endeavour to capture the banner or the flag of an enemy. In such societies, religion was the ultimate point of reference by which a group affirmed its identity, declared its independent existence, claimed its origins, and proclaimed its destiny. A supernatural dimension was in this way incorporated into social life, and ethnicity and locality had conferred upon them supramundane significance.

Tribal religion of this kind was unsophisticated, lacking anything resembling coherent teaching. It was essentially a matter of collective practice. Its social functions were latent and unperceived, but it augmented the sense of cohesion of the group and it validated group purposes and activities. The appeal to its own special deities, to the group's ancestors, or to spirits identified with particular local physical features important in the group's environment, provided the ultimate point of reference for the community. By this means, the group took cognizance of itself and projected itself in relation to both nature and to other neighbouring communities and peoples.

Although tribal societies generally made no conscious distinction between the categories of natural and supernatural phenomena, none the less, virtually all such peoples maintained this kind of supernaturalist interpretation of their *raison d'être*. That they did so, indicates that, at least in earlier stages of social evolution, such invocation of the supernatural on behalf of the entire community fulfilled a function which appears to have been indispensable in expressing what bound them together. What is also apparent is that just as tribes or groups were often in conflict with one another, so their religions were also generally seen as mutually antagonistic and inappropriate for anyone outside the bounds of the group itself. In this sense, religion marked a non-geographic but none the less vital social frontier. If religion was one of the terms which identified those who belonged to the same social group, it also made clear those who were excluded. Religion legitimized the divisions and the differences, and established social if not terrestrial frontiers.

For a cogent example of all this, we may turn to the Old Testament. There we have a long historical account of the struggle of the Israelites against a variety of enemies, and numerous invocations of their god to protect them and to fight with them. Their primary struggle, of course, was against other peoples who constituted their external enemies. There was, however, also a secondary struggle. And that was to maintain their own separate identity distinct from that of those indigenous tribes whose land they had invaded. To legitimize their invasion and their continuing military struggle for dominance, they maintained the fiction that the land had been promised to them by their god—they claimed to be a chosen people. Israel was a confederacy of tribes, held together by a covenant with their god—an oath-bound confederation which lacked, over long periods, permanent central political institutions, a "cult league" as Max Weber called it.<sup>1</sup> Yet, despite this solemn covenant, as settlers they were vulnerable to co-optation into the pervasive culture of the indigenous peoples. As pastoralists, living among tribes some of whom were nomadic, the need for boundaries of other than a strictly geographic kind was perhaps all the more imperative. A

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<sup>1</sup> Max Weber, *Ancient Judaism*, Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1952, p. 75ff.

shared common religion was, we must suppose, an agency which reinforced the sense of identity; it provided ideological boundaries; and it reaffirmed group distinctiveness. At numerous points, the prophets warned Israel against adopting the heathen customs of the other peoples alongside whom they lived. Religion became the hallmark of their identity. In a situation where there was no possibility of establishing physical frontiers, a people conscious of its distinctive status, affirmed its identity by following mores that they held to constitute a divine command morality explicitly prescribed by their deity. In his name, they indicted many of the customs of the indigenous peoples.

One conspicuous moral interdiction has persisted as part of the Judaic legacy to Christian morality, even though its function as a distinguishing taboo has now been lost. This was the rigorous prohibition of homosexual behaviour. Religiously sanctioned sodomy, perhaps with male temple prostitutes, was a conspicuous and distinctive practice of the Canaanites. In response, the Israelites developed the strongest interdiction of homosexual behaviour. The general explanation for the vigour with which the Israelites propounded this taboo, lies in the contrast that it established with the religiously-prescribed customs of neighbouring peoples. Their stern and oft-reiterated indictment of sodomy functioned to establish firm boundaries between the Israelites and the despised indigenous peoples of Palestine. Inheriting this strong moral proscription from Judaism, Christianity also for some time found it useful as a putative boundary marker between God's people and others. In the Middle Ages, those perceived as inadequate Christians, namely heretics such as the Albigensians, from whom the faithful were rigorously to separate themselves, were regularly also accused of the unnatural vice of sodomy. The religious frontier of special identity was thus given a powerful moral dimension.

As the repository of group rituals, customs, and values, religion functioned to sustain social cohesion by reinforcing the shared orientations of the group. Religion legitimized authority within society. It was invoked to endorse such group policies as embarking on warfare; suing for peace; cementing alliances. The regulations governing what should be hunted or planted, and the approved means, times, seasons and places for hunting, for sowing and reaping were supported, or perhaps initiated in patterns of religiously prescribed order. Judeo-Christian religion, in particular then, became the anchorage for moral dispositions cultivated by a system of injunctions and restraints, but generally the affirmation of group identity was a matter intimately concerned with the collective security of the whole community. Social control depended on the threat that supernatural sanctions would be incurred for infractions of the moral code. Maintenance of the rules was frequently felt to be essential to avert the wrath of the gods, and the group itself might apply what has been called "public hygiene" against the dangerous man whose unsanctioned conduct might put the well-being of the group at risk.

Societies which evolved a more encompassing political apparatus may have been less dependent on the distinctiveness of their religion to augment their sense of identity. None the less, in certain circumstances, religion might still be the defining agency for a separated community. In no instance was this more dramatically the case than in the emergence of Christianity. Although beginning as a sect within Judaism, from very early days the new faith began to gather a following which separated itself from others, and claimed for itself a distinctive, implicitly elite status. Such were the transcendent claims of the early Christians that they demanded exemption from the laws and obligations of subjects of the Roman state within which they lived. Paul contended against the narrower conceptions of Peter and the Jerusalem Christians, who saw Christianity as essentially a Jewish sect, bound by the ritual requirements of Judaism, and he made the universalistic proclamation that Christians were neither bond nor free, Greek nor Jew. His pronouncement was a claim to a voluntarily assumed identity which paralleled, but which also transcended, the ethnic, linguistic, political, and imperial bonds of allegiance which prevailed in the contemporary Roman world. What Christianity offered was a new foundation for identity, a new, non-ethnic, essentially voluntary ideological basis in terms of which to claim affiliations which in their compelling nature far exceeded the involuntary bonds of blood, family, clan, tribal, or such conceptions of national identity as then existed. Given the social status of the early Christian converts, many of whom appear to have been slaves, migrants, or displaced persons, this was, perhaps, the only basis on which the new religion could establish itself. If it were to survive, it was necessary for it to outbid all other claims to allegiance, and to establish firmly that adherents of the new faith were first and foremost Christians, whatever else they might have been or, in a residual sense, might still be. The viability of Christianity depended on the creation of a new community in which all other ethnic attributes or political loyalties were at least subordinated and perhaps relinquished. Gradually, Christianity evolved a quasi-political structure of a new type which affirmed organizationally the identity of its participants, and established a frontier between Christians and pagans. As a congregational institution, the church may have been modelled on the synagogue, affording regular and frequent association of believers, but unlike the synagogue, it was open to all who made the ideological commitment to participate. Thus it reinforced shared belief by regular association and a more formal pattern of attachment, commitment not only to the new faith but also to the church structure and to the religious community as such.

Initially, Christianity required a conscious and deliberate act of commitment on the part of adherents, and notionally this requirement persisted in ensuing centuries. In the very early period of its history, Christian belief could not be an inherited obligation. Christians *chose* to be such. They created their own frontiers vis-a-vis the wider population,

and celebrated their own separate identity. Persecution in the early centuries undoubtedly reinforced that sense of separation. But that might be seen as a purely adventitious factor. Even without it, Christians forged a distinctive identity of their own. Indeed, it was their determination to erect a barrier between themselves and the rest of the Roman world, in persistently refusing to incorporate in their worship reverence to the Roman emperor, that induced the intermittent persecution to which they were subjected. Two factors combined in Christianity to present a threat to their pagan contemporaries. First there was the insistent exclusivism of Christians. And second, there was the strong Christian commitment to proselytize. Christian exclusivism demanded that all other beliefs be rejected as false and inimical, and therefore that converts should abandon all other religious affiliations. The Roman authorities might have tolerated a measure of exclusivism such as they tolerated for the Jews, but, in general, the Jews did not seek to convert outsiders, and eventually they came strongly to re-affirm that their religion was essentially ethnically-based. Christianity was clearly more dangerous. It looked actively for converts and it claimed not merely to be the religion for a chosen people, such as was claimed for Judaism by Jews, but also declared itself to be the only true religion for *all* mankind. Thus, in their reaction to Christians, the external authorities reinforced the Church's own predisposition to establish a frontier between itself and the non-Christian world. Such was the transcendent claim made for Christian faith, that this frontier alone was to be inviolate. All other boundaries were to be set aside, as the Christian affirmed his paramount identity in terms of the religious commitment that he had espoused.

The subsequent coalition of Church and State, beginning with Constantine and continuing as the norm for Christian Europe, saw the loss of the pre-eminence of religion as the basis for social identity. As political agencies were reformulated and with the eventual emergence of state societies, religion was for a long period generally relegated to a subsidiary role in the affirmation of identity. Although the Church continued to lay claim to primacy in mobilizing loyalties, in practice, political entities were generally more effective in commanding the allegiance of the people within their now geographically-based territories. Only when some superordinate cause, such as the call to defend the Holy Land which led to the Crusades, was religion able to claim primacy over narrower, more localized, political loyalties, and then only uncertainly. At times, indeed, the Church became a mere pawn in the political game, as monarchs sponsored rival papal claimants and used them in their power struggles. Notionally, pre-Reformation Europe was religiously unified, and Christianity had only a very generalized role as an agency conferring identity on the people at large. None the less, at local level, religious sources were frequently invoked to sustain group rivalries and to affirm group identity. Village patron saints were not uncommonly set over against each other, particularly when

miracles and visions were claimed simultaneously by parishes which sought to compete for the profits that were available to those churches which became centres of pilgrimage. Remnants of the same tendency may still be found — for example, in Malta the rivalry between neighbouring parishes in the promotion of village *festas*, sometimes involves claims to the superiority of one saint over another — Our Lady of Lourdes may be claimed by the parishioners of one village to be more virginal than Our Lady of Fatima to whom the church of a neighbouring parish is dedicated.

Once, however, the apparent religious conformity of mediaeval times was breached at the Reformation, religion again emerged with the potential at least to reinforce political identity. The principal of *cuius regio, eius religio* which was established at the Peace of Augsburg in 1555, made religious divergence a premiss on which distinctive principality, national, or political identity could once again be underwritten. State churches celebrated in religious terms the claimed political identity of a people. Such was the strength which the particular national agencies of Christianity acquired that, following the transplanting of Europeans to the United States in the nineteenth century, many of the Protestant churches continued as separate national entities, designated as, for example, the Swedish Lutheran Church, the German Lutheran Church, or the Norwegian Lutheran Church. A national sense of identity was here reinforced by, but in these instances also transcended, religious divisions, and even a religion which all shared in common, was not strong enough to provide a sense of shared identity which overrode national, linguistic, and cultural bases of identification.

Official Protestantism adapted more fully to the political demands of different states than did Roman Catholicism, which, at least at the higher level of its own hierarchy, did so to a very much smaller extent. Yet, in cultural terms, the case was not entirely different, as the evidence, again from the American so-called “melting pot”, makes clear. There the Catholic church was dominated first by the Irish immigrants, then by the Italians, and later by the Poles. Thus each newly arriving group found that the church to which they had belonged was, here in America, under quite alien control which was for them far from congenial. It was this circumstance which led to the emergence of the Polish National Catholic Church as a schismatic body in the United States, as a protest against the dominance of Catholics of a different nationality and culture. The consequences were even more profound when the Puerto Rican immigrants emerged in the country in the 1950s and 1960s. Accustomed as they were, at home, to a much more communally based structure of Catholicism, they were doubly alienated from the version of Catholicism which they encountered in the United States. They reacted against both the institutionalized character of the Roman Church in the States, and against what was for them the foreign character that had been imposed upon it by earlier immigrants. Seeking the reassurance of the type of small supportive local groups which the Catholic

church had provided for them at home, many Puerto Ricans immigrants abandoned Catholicism in favour of Pentecostalism which was more immediately responsive to their needs<sup>2</sup>. Thus, in these circumstances, religion was less powerful as an agency of boundary-maintenance than were the stronger ties of inherited common culture and the bonds of national and linguistic identity. But religion became the vehicle through which that sense of separate cultural, if not national identity might be expressed and sustained.

If we return to early Reformation Europe, it is clear that the nascent nation states and the minor principalities found in religion a support for their claims to sovereignty. The legitimation which religion provided for secular rulers was still sought, even if, as was typically the case in Protestant countries, church authorities were certainly politically subordinate; with appointments effectively made, not by a church hierarchy, but by the political powers themselves. Religion was invoked to augment and consolidate the claims to legitimate authority for the constitution and the polity. Did the remit of religion go further? The wars of the seventeenth century, in continental Europe and in Britain, are sometimes represented as religious wars, and certainly the rhetoric in terms of which they were fought was religious. Religion was at least still a legitimating force, justifying war as well as less dramatic acts of policy. One may doubt whether it established frontiers: at best, it functioned to make political frontiers more impermeable. One sees that, regarding religion, monarchs were capable of considerable cynicism. The examples are numerous. Thus, one of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania, at an earlier date, made a conscious and purely expedient political choice between Orthodox and Catholic versions of Christianity. Henry VIII of England, having written vigorously against Luther and having had conferred upon him by the pope, the title of *Defender of the Faith*, turned Protestant at least in part because he wished to divorce his Aragonese wife. And Henry IV of France was a Protestant who became turncoat in order to become king of France, saying that Paris was "worth a mass".

There was a general assumption among the political authorities in Europe, that one of the vital functions of religion was to reinforce social cohesion within a society. Dissent was seen not merely as a matter of religious deviation, but potentially as a source of disruption for the society as a whole. Religious consensus was generally believed essential for social cohesion and national security. It was in response to this assumption that the state persecuted dissenters and sought to execute or expel them. The Church itself had warranted such treatment, expressed vigorously by Thomas Aquinas, who wrote:

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<sup>2</sup> See Renato Poblete and T. F. O'Dea "Anomie and the 'Quest for Community': The Formation of Sects among the Puerto Ricans of New York", *American Catholic Sociological Review*, 21, 1, (1960), pp. 18-36.

“In regard to heretics... there is their sin, by which they have deserved not only to be separated from the Church, but to be eliminated from the world by death. For it is a graver matter to corrupt the faith which is the life of the soul than to falsify money which sustains temporal life. So if it be just that forgers and malefactors are put to death without mercy by the secular authorities, with how much greater reason may heretics be not only excommunicated but also be put to death, when once they are convicted of heresy. On the part of the Church there is merciful hope of conversion of those in error [but] if the heretic remains pertinacious, the Church, despairing of his conversion, makes provision for the safety of others, and separating him by the sentence of excommunication from the Church, passes him to secular judgement to be exterminated from this world by death.”<sup>1</sup>

Such hostility towards religious dissenters was not confined to Catholic countries, although it was most pronounced there. The persecution of Anabaptists in the Holy Roman Empire was typical, while the massacre, on St. Bartholomew's Eve, 1572, of French Protestants remains perhaps unparalleled among Christians as a cynical act by which one group made manifest its hostility towards another group of Christians. In England, Catholics were objects of suspicion, particularly because of the fear that they might act in the interests of Spain, and for centuries any Jesuit who was discovered was notionally subject to sentence of death as a suspected enemy of the state.

The European state evolved as a partnership with the Church, with the state notionally subordinate in Catholic countries, but everywhere the relations were close. In the seventeenth century, Archbishop Laud in England pursued an aggressive policy towards dissenters which was partially responsible for their rising against both Church and State in the Civil War. His contemporary, Cardinal Richelieu, as head of government in France, pursued a policy of reinforcing the power of the Church, and took as his mission the elimination of the Protestant minority which was, at that time, well ensconced in parts of southern and western France. Bishops continued to be drawn predominantly if not exclusively from the ruling classes in various European countries certainly until the end of the eighteenth century and sometimes later. Nation and religion were sewn together, and religion continued to be invoked to provide a strong support of national identity.

The strong belief that religious consensus produced, or at least sustained, social cohesion was first challenged by the development of the United States of America. Here was a country the citizens of which were drawn from various cultures and diverse religious persuasions. Furthermore, many of those who had emigrated to America were religious refugees, seeking to

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica* Secunda Secundae Partis Qu. 10, Art 11 “Tolerance of non-Christian cults”.

escape the oppressive regimes of Europe where men were coerced into religious conformity. There were Puritans in Massachusetts, Baptists in Rhode Island, Quakers in Pennsylvania, Catholics in Maryland, and, sooner or later, a variety of German and Dutch sects — Pietists, Anabaptists, Moravian Brethren, Mennonites, among others — scattered in various states, as well as those who were not refugees, Anglicans in large part, in states such as Virginia. Clearly, if the various states were to form a stable federation, and hence one new world society, religious toleration and not religious consensus must become the basis of social cohesion. In a sense, the Americans discovered a higher principle than that of religious conformity. They perceived that a principle of toleration was the only basis on which so diverse a new nation could possibly hold together. The alternative was the prospect of constant division and perhaps social conflict. *That inevitable conclusion implied, of course, the relativizing of religion.* It suggested that there was a principle that stood higher than the truths proclaimed by any one religion, namely the demand for tolerance. Religious pluralism became the new norm, and toleration the key principle for the new type of state being forged in North America. It was, of course, also a massive concession to secularization, since in the interests of equality of all religions, the state had necessarily to be a secular state — the first secular state. Thus, in the American case, religion was superseded as an agency for the type of boundary-maintenance which it had reinforced between European countries. It ceased to mark significant political frontiers, even though it continued to function in the lesser role of marking the cultural boundaries between *different social groups within the country.* The creation of a state based on toleration relegated each specific faith to a subordinate sphere, and created in America what has been called, following Rousseau, “civil religion”,<sup>4</sup> that is, faith in a higher abstract principle of justice transcending the particularities of each separate religious denomination. Thus it was that Will Herberg could write that, within the tolerant American context, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Judaism all expressed both American identity and a common commitment to ethical ideals that were embodied in the ultimate authority of the state, and which surpassed the specific moral demands of any religion.<sup>5</sup>

In relativizing all religion, the pluralism which became the norm in America went further than the measure of pluralism and toleration which had earlier prevailed as a limited concession in other parts of the world. *Toleration, after all, does not mean complete religious liberty. It implies only that those who embrace a different religion from that endorsed by the authorities will not be persecuted, and that the dominant religious party withholds the power it might command to repress people of different*

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<sup>4</sup> See Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America”, *Daedalus*, 96, 1 (1967) pp. 1-21.

<sup>5</sup> Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, New York: Doubleday, 1955.

religious persuasions. Thus, apart from the attitude towards dissenting heretics, there was a measure of limited toleration in Europe before the settlement of America. We have noted the words of Aquinas, who saw the Jews as people who, though benighted, had a faith which was a pre-echo of Christianity. He believed of the Jews that, in observing their rituals, "the true faith [this is of course Christianity], was foreshadowed of old".<sup>6</sup> The Jews might therefore be tolerated, in the sense that they were not to be prohibited in their religious rites. More emphatically in the Islamic world, specifically in the Ottoman empire, Jews and Christians were tolerated, and in the millet system they were permitted to create and sustain their own segregated communities and to preserve their distinctive cultures. The ghetto of mediæval Europe was a not dissimilar arrangement. In these segregated enclaves, religion was still the primary affirmation of identity. It provided the basis for the establishment of well-demarcated local boundaries between peoples of different cultures. Those boundaries were based on the differences of religious inheritance. But the example of American pluralism — which was gradually imitated elsewhere — relegated religion to a subsidiary role as an effective marker of major political and cultural boundaries.

There are certain circumstances in which religion may become a surrogate for other bases for the affirmation of identity and the maintenance of frontiers between peoples. In particular it may provide a surrogate national identity. When a country is conquered or invaded, religion may once again come into play. The case of the Jews is obvious. For many centuries deprived of a country, the Jews often assimilated culturally and politically to the host societies in which they lived. What remained to hold them apart was religion, and that residue of culture which religion could sustain. Thus the celebrated Cochin Jews and the Bene Israel communities in India were almost totally assimilated to Indian society, and physically those calling themselves Jews were indistinguishable from indigenous Indians — but the Jews remained conscious of their distinctive identity, and were able to do so because they had managed, against all the odds, to preserve at least vestiges of their religious rites.<sup>7</sup>

This function has not been confined to the Jews, even if they afford the most dramatic instance. A similar role for religion as a form of surrogate political expression occurred in the case of Poland in the years of communist rule, years effectively of Russian dominance in Poland's affairs. Religion became a substitute for politics, a basis for the affirmation of Polish identity. Its role in this regard was long-established, as the Poles, hemmed in over the long course of history between the Protestant Prussians, the Orthodox

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<sup>6</sup> Aquinas, *loc. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> See on these communities, Schifra Strizower, *The Children of Israel: The Bene Israel of Bombay*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1971; and *idem.*, *Exotic Jewish Communities*, London: Thomas Yoseloff, 1962.

Russians, and the Muslim Turks, found in their Catholicism, an expression in sacred, transcendental terms of their Polishness. Under communism, official opposition to the regime was scarcely permitted, but the Catholic religion became the voice of political dissent. Since the country had no leaders other than those approved by the party and, effectively, by the Russians, the only alternative leaders available were the Catholic clergy. Priests constituted the indigenous leadership stratum. They became the symbolic voices of Polish identity, and established the continuance of a sense of nationality in a context *in which no other vehicle for such expression was available*. The churches became the physical centres, the points of mobilization for the people in opposition to the imposed political elite. Indeed, such was their popular acclaim, that many clergy became concerned at the role into which they were being pushed, and feared that this development might be a distraction from their fundamental religious purposes.

The Irish case is not altogether dissimilar. Like other colonized people, they lacked, over centuries, the opportunity for political expression of national identity, when the natural frontiers which had existed were neutralized by the settlement in Ireland of the dominant British. Irish culture and identity could be realized only by the people's persistence in maintaining a religion different from that of the colonizers. The very strength and conservatism of Irish Catholicism may owe much to its function as a mark of differentiation from the Protestantism (and post-Protestant secularism) of Britain. Because the gentry and the landowners were all of them British — Anglo-Irish as they were called — the only indigenous leader available to the local community was its priest. The symbolic frontiers of Ireland were thus maintained by the functioning of the Church, and religious observance became a manifest demonstration of Irish patriotism. Perhaps for these reasons there has been some resistance in Ireland to the modernizing tendencies within contemporary Catholicism. As the anthropologist Mary Douglas observed, the Irish peasant was aggrieved to be relieved, by Vatican II, of the obligation not to eat meat on Fridays, because this deprived him of a symbolic gesture through which he asserted not so much his Catholicism as his Irishness.<sup>8</sup> Greece under Turkish rule constitutes a similar case.

The foregoing examples are drawn from Catholic and Orthodox instances, but Protestantism, too, in certain circumstances, has also helped to reinforce national and cultural boundaries. In the United States, for at least a generation, and sometimes longer, the original cultural heritage of immigrants was retained largely through the agency of the immigrant churches which continued to flourish. Thus, to mention a case we have alluded to already, the Norwegian Lutheran Church preserved not only Lutheran religion as Norwegian immigrants remembered it from their land of their origin, but it also acted to preserve Norwegian culture. The Church became the only

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<sup>8</sup> Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1970, p. 37.

context in which immigrants could hear and speak their native language and engage in their original folk customs, maintaining the Norwegian psychic frontier long after its members had settled into being, or at least into becoming, American citizens.<sup>9</sup> The other national Lutheran churches when transplanted to America fulfilled precisely the same functions. So bound up were nationhood and religion in these Protestant countries, that the case is recorded for a Swede who, in that overwhelmingly Protestant country, decided to become a Roman Catholic. "You cannot do that", urged his friends, "you cannot do that — you would cease to be a Swede!"

The confusion of national and religious identity, and thus of geographic and cultural frontiers, is nowhere better and more tragically illustrated than in the contemporary case of Bosnia in particular and the former Yugoslavia in general. There, separate ethnic groupings, claim national identity even though for many decades that national identity (as Croats, Serbs, Montenegrins, etc.) has been partly submerged in the operation of the Yugoslav multi-ethnic state. Despite considerable ethnic inter-mixing, and the smooth functioning for long periods of highly diversified local communities, the outbreak of conflict has resuscitated national and ethnic dreams of independence and differentiated destiny. In the process religious differences have also been called into operation, most specifically in the case of the Bosnian Muslims, who are not in origin so much a distinctive national group, but are rather of similar ethnic origins to their Catholic Croat and Orthodox Serbian neighbours. What has most particularly differentiated them from Croats or Serbs has been their religion. The new frontiers in former Yugoslavia, and particularly in Bosnia-Herzegovina, if they are ever drawn, are likely to be drawn not only with ethnic origin in mind but also with due regard to religion. Culture, language, and ethnicity (in the sense of racial, tribal, or national attribution) have become inextricably mixed with religion, and since this is so, the sense of identity of these people is virtually solemnized and sacralized by that religious component. The sense of separate identity, which is usually also the sense of *superior* identity, draws on this religious factor, but is undoubtedly further stimulated by the fact that these peoples co-exist in close juxtaposition with one another, with no clearly recognized geographical frontiers, but with only those frontiers which religiously preserved culture can sustain. These, then, are exceptions to the general trend — a trend for the significance of religion as a boundary marker to diminish. But if the role of religion has diminished, perhaps the same is true, in most instances, of nationhood.

In general, as nation states have grown bigger and more complex in their structure, a diminution has occurred in the atavistic attitudes which gave rise to raw and unreasoned patriotism and pride in national identity. In

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<sup>9</sup> See Nicholas Tavuchis, *Pastors and Immigrants: The Role of a Religious Elite in the Absorption of Norwegian Immigrants*. The Hague: Nijhoff, 1963.

consequence, when modern man has had need to establish his sense of identity, he has had to seek out other agencies by which to affirm it. Marx sought to persuade men that their identity depended on the situation in which they found themselves in relation to the means of production. His ideological endeavour may be said to have failed, since although men recognized the importance of their relation to their productive tasks, and did readily recognize themselves as separated into distinct classes, none the less, in everyday life, they identified with much less abstract entities than the two classes into which Marx sought to divide humanity.

In those countries which industrialized earlier, and in which freedom of religious belief prevailed, markedly in Britain, the United States, Germany, and the northern European countries, men did not always find their specific status positions adequate to give expression to their social identity. Religion was sometimes also called into play. The different social classes of those societies showed considerable affinity for particular variants of religious expression. Whilst there was no uniform correlation between social status and religious persuasion, the various denominations within Christianity, and more especially within Protestantism, facilitated in congenial terms the manifestation of identity of particular social strata. These lesser religious frontiers arose within the nation state society, demarcating lines between people who had a strong belief in their own virtue, and who trans-valuated in religious terms their strong sense of their own worthiness. They might enjoy relatively little honour in the social scale, but by their adoption of a particular religious orientation, and their affiliation with a body of like-minded and like-circumstanced fellow beings, they established a sense of identity for themselves and drew the boundaries between their own kind and the rest of society. Dissenters were everywhere identified with specific occupations. Thus the millenarian movements of pre-Reformation Europe, conspicuously in the Rheinland and the Netherlands, were recognized as being led by weavers and other industrialized occupational groups. The dissenters of seventeenth and eighteenth century England were artisans and trades people — despised alike by the gentry and the agricultural classes. The mass revivalism of the late eighteenth century under Wesley appealed to yet lower strata, miners and domestic servants being prominent among the converts to Methodism. From these diverse expressions of Christian dissenting belief, these often newly emerging social strata acquired a sense of identity by affirming, in the face of the hostility of longer established social classes, their ultimate worth in the sight of God. In the process, they sometimes acquired not only the legitimation which they sought but also attitudes of mutual contempt for other classes, culminating at times in a disposition of believing themselves “holier than thou”. Their sense of apartness was vital to their sense of identity. By being set over against other social strata, by building the boundaries of their faith, they affirmed their own identity. Their religion

transformed their folk mores into respectable religiously-sanctioned customs. From it they acquired a sense of community, and they learned how to organize themselves, initially for religious purposes, but eventually also for industrial unionism, and, in a measure, eventually even for the pursuit of political goals.

In the contemporary world, however, these differences have diminished, and there is less appeal to religion either for legitimation or as an affirmation of identity. The integrity of nation states is no longer so readily assumed, and the old nationalism and even nationality are taken less and less for granted, as new supra-national agencies—the United Nations, the Council of Europe, the Helsinki Accord, and the European Community, increasingly intervene in the affairs of societies that not so long ago would have brooked no such incursions across their frontiers. As society has become secularized, so its institutions and agencies have lost their claims to transcendent significance, and the old sense of religiously sanctioned local, regional, and national identity, secure behind well-established frontiers, has dimmed. As apparently fewer people maintain an active belief in God's providence or in their own prospects of continuing into an afterlife, so the felt-need for a religious reaffirmation of social identity, or even perhaps of personal identity, has diminished. Within Christianity, the drawing together of different denominations in the process of contemporary ecumenism, has diminished the distinctiveness of religious bodies one from another, including in some measure even the three major strands of Christendom—Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant. With the loss of that distinctiveness has also been lost the capacity of religion to reinforce social boundaries and to sacralize social or personal identity.

Inevitably, there are, in Western society, some exceptions from these broad generalizations. At a narrower level, religion may still be mobilized to affirm identity and to establish boundaries between those within a particular religious organization and those outside it. In the instances that I have in mind, the religious body itself claims to be the sole and sufficient entity to which individual members should relate. It creates its own frontiers and resists every assault on them. I refer to various Christian sects and to contemporary fundamentalism. The sects exist as more or less totalitarian societies, seeking to encompass the lives of their adherents, and specifying the mores and obligations which they must maintain if they are to continue in fellowship. The more intense among them may prohibit their members from participating in worldly pursuits such as dancing, theatre-going, card-playing, gambling, watching television, and even associating with worldly people, as well as more obvious taboos on pre-marital sexuality. Such is their concern to establish their own boundaries, that the sect may require its young male members to seek exemption on grounds of conscience from military service, and all members to seek excusal from service on court juries. The followers of many sects—Jehovah's Witnesses, Christadelphians,

and Exclusive Brethren, among them — refuse to join trades unions, and rigorously hold themselves aloof from involvement in political elections.

The boundary which the sect seeks to maintain between itself and the world is a strong frontier. The sectarian acquires his entire sense of identity primarily, and as nearly as possible exclusively, from his religious affiliation. His age, occupation, education, social status, nationality, or ethnic group are all of little consequence compared to his religious commitment. The Jehovah's Witness is a Witness first and foremost, before he is a factory worker, a Londoner, a British citizen, a West Indian immigrant, or anything else in terms of which he might be identified. All other involvements are kept to an absolute minimum in the interests of fulfilling his voluntary religious obligations. Religion can sustain these frontiers, at least for relatively small minorities who, however, collectively may number millions of people world-wide. The cost, of course, is that all other frontiers, all other sources of identity, values, interests, and recreations and hobbies are relinquished in favour of those that are part of the prescriptions of the sect itself.

My examples of religion as an agency of boundary-maintenance have been chiefly drawn from religions of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition. We might ask whether other religious traditions function in anything like the same way to affirm identity and to sustain cultural distinctiveness. The answer must be that they do sometimes and to some extent, but perhaps less consistently than has been the case with these religions of middle eastern provenance. The contemporary evidence from India indicates, particularly in the rise of certain species of Hindu fundamentalism, that Hinduism might also be mobilized to reinforce cultural frontiers. Traditionally, Hinduism legitimized, and its priestly stratum may have indeed created, powerful internal divisions within traditional Indian society, as exemplified by the rigid frontiers of the caste system. Here were virtually impermeable barriers between social groups, sacralized by a pervasive belief system, and cemented by a system of occupational succession and the virtual prohibition of any sort of social mobility. In the modern setting, the capacity of Hinduism to affirm national identity may itself have been sharpened and intensified by its co-existence alongside a vigorous rival, Islam. As a voluntaristic, proselytizing religion, Islam may always be seen as a potent threat to an ethnically-based, hence non-proselytizing religion like Hinduism.

Elsewhere, where religions operate side-by-side, and maintain some type of symbiotic relationship, such as occurs between most Buddhist movements and Shintoism in Japan, neither religion can claim solely to establish frontiers and reaffirm Japanese identity. Together, however, they may indeed do so, and both faiths play a part in the maintenance of that uniqueness of Japanese culture which so much preoccupies the Japanese, and from which they do derive a strong sense of their difference from other

peoples. For centuries, Japan closed its external frontiers, and isolated itself from almost all external influences. In such a situation, the need for religion to reinforce frontiers was perhaps scarcely necessary. Japanese religion, in those circumstances, certainly shared with other features of Japanese culture, an inheritance of a distinctive and peculiar kind.

The pre-eminence of Christianity among frontier-reinforcing religions is perhaps primarily due to the combination of features which we noticed at the beginning of this paper: rigorous exclusivism and the commitment to proselytize. These elements in the early Church put the Christian element of identity at a premium, and it is exactly this emphasis which characterizes modern sectarianism. Whilst for the vast majority of Christians in the modern West, religion is no longer a crucial point confirming social identity, for the early Christians it was, and for contemporary sectarians, it remains, in its own way, the last —and the first— frontier.

#### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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